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Monitoring CIA

PRESIDENT Kennedy's reactivation of a White House panel of distinguished civilians to monitor U.S. intelligence activities obviously is aimed at offsetting new demands for a congressional "watchdog" committee to keep a closer check on the Central Intelligence Agency.

Neither of these approaches, however, meets the problem of supervising or perhaps even of restraining CIA on a practical day-to-day basis.

That responsibility could hardly be assumed by part-time consultants, however capable. Mr. Kennedy seems to have recognized this, for in naming Dr. James R. Killian Jr. of MIT to be committee chairman, the President requested only a broad review of the nation's over-all intelligence effort, to be followed by periodic committee reports on the objectives and performance of CIA and other intelligence agencies.

As for placing CIA under congressional scrutiny, the disadvantages if not the danger of such an arrangement were spelled out more than once by former President Eisenhower. In fact, it was to divert Capitol Hill pressure on CIA in 1956 that Mr. Eisenhower created the civilian panel which Mr. Kennedy has now revived.

By the secret nature of its work, CIA should be accountable to the President alone. Dr. Killian and his colleagues can function usefully as overseers of CIA's broader policies and performance, but they cannot provide what CIA needs most. And this is the close, continuing control that only Mr. Kennedy himself can exercise, either personally or through a trusted White House aide.